SUNRISE -- SUNSET

January 4, 1987, 11;00 a.m. Worship Service

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Scripture

Isaiah 40:1-8
I Corinthians 13:8-13

"...as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease;..." -- I Corinthians 13:8 (RSV)

There are plenty of reminders that time is linear, not cylical. It is now 1987. 1986 is gone. We had just grown accustomed to it and now we have to change again. 1987. And if you forget that time moves on, your humanity has a disturbing and sometimes rude way of reminding you. I didn't know whether to be pleased or insulted with one of my gifts on Christmas Day. It is a small retractable magnifying glass for the glove compartment of my car. It's purpose is to help me do something I began to find difficult to do recently, namely read the small numbers on a road map. The person who gave it to me is the one to whom I usually say, "here, you read it" and who doesn't read the small numbers very effectively anymore either: the same one who gave me a magnifying glass to keep by the telephone book for my birthday. There are plenty of reminders of the mystery of time and its inexorable movement.

You recall, I am sure, that wonderful moment in Fiddler on the Roof when, at the wedding of his daughter, Tehve sings:

"Is this the little girl I carried?
Is this the little boy at play?
I don't remember growing older...
When did they?

Now is the little boy a bridegroom
Now is the little girl a bride
Under the canopy I see them
Side by side

Sunrise - sunset, sunrise - sunset
Swiftly fly the years
One season following another
Laden with happiness and tears."

Those lyrics touch a universally tender nerve. Even those who ordinarily try not to respond emotionally to the sentimentality of pop

music, find this one nearly irresistible. It has been suggested that the real difference between human beings and the other creatures is that we are aware of time. The others live in the bliss of timelessness, apparently. Your cat lives in eternity as it were, with no sense of the fact that there was a yesterday that is forever gone, that today is almost over and tomorrow will soon be here and gone as well. We, alone in creation, know about time, which means we know we won't live forever, which means we know anxiety.

John Updike has a wonderful book of poems called Facing Nature, many of which are about coming to terms with the passing of time, aging, and mortality. I liked particularly Upon the Last Day of His Forty-Ninth Year.

"Scritch, scratch, saith the frozen spring snow
not near enough this season or the last,
but still a skin for skiing on, with care.
At every shaky turn into the fall line
one hundred eighty pounds of tired blood
and innards weakly laced with muscle seek
to give themselves to gravity and ruin.
My knees, a-tremble with old reflex resist
and try to find the lazy dancer's step
and pillowed curve my edges flirted with
when I had little children to amaze
and life seemed endlessly flexible. Now,
my heavy body swings to face the valley
and feels the gut pull of steep maturity."
[p. 10]

All of us, I submit, know what that poem is about, even if we've never been on a pair of skis. We know what Sunrise - Sunset is about even if we have no children to be married. We know about the anxiety which results from the changes time brings. Unlike the cat, you and I do not have the luxury of living in the bliss of timelessness. It is human to know that yesterday is gone and to regret it, to know nostalgia and the longing for the past which is, as the youngsters say, - "history."

The holiday season always seems to agitate that latent nostalgia in us. The ghost of Christmas past haunted Ebeneezer Scrooge and the memory of Christmases past is an important part of our celebration. We remember at Christmas. We recall how the celebration was in our childhood. We recall with affection the people who were an important part of our experience and who are gone now. That sweet sadness is part of what happens to us around December 25. Then comes January 1 with its overt celebration of time's passing, and it's not-very-subtle symbols of the Old Year and the New Year, and we are virtually forced to acknowledge that time has passed and we are older. 1987. Think of it!

It is more important to us than we acknowledge ordinarily. And it doesn't take much to prompt most of us to begin reacting and responding.

The Bible is full of it. Our forebears pondered the passing of time even as we do. We are certainly not unique in our sense of our own

mortality. But from the beginning, the faith of God's people has embraced time as a good part of God's creation - and has affirmed time's passing as part of God's good plan for creation. While others are trying desperately to make time stand still, or turning youth and youthfulness into an idol, the Bible is teaching:

"For everything there is a season,
and a time for every matter under heaven,
a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up
what is planted..."

The Psalter sees God's glory in time passing:

"Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place
in all generations.
Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the
world,
from everlasting to everlasting thou art God...
a thousand years in thy sight
are but as yesterday when it is passed."

In that wonderful hymn, Psalm 90, the brevity and transitoriness of human life are even celebrated as testimony to God's eternity. The Psalm teaches the precious value of time and urges the faithful to measure and number each day.

And in that beloved passage of First Corinthians we read this morning we heard St. Paul's uncompromising honesty about time and change.

"As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away."

Each of those passages represents the Biblical approach to time and mortality, the honesty of which, at times, can makes us uncomfortable. The Bible does not deny or disguise it, but affirms as natural and as good, the process of aging in which everyone of us is involved.

By contrast, you and I are inclined to deal with the process - either by ignoring it, or more assertively - defying it. We try, for instance, to reassure ourselves that the years are taking their toll on our friends but not on us. We attend the class reunion and spend at least some of the time privately comparing ourselves favorably with our classmates - who are truly showing their age. Hundreds of products are marketed on the basis of the promise to recover our youth or preserve what is left of it. To a degree that is distressingly consistent, youth - youthfulness, is the ideal, the model for clothing, jewelry, music - of course; there is even a drink which not long ago presented itself to those who think young. Orthodox marketing dogma dictates that maturity not be mentioned .. older people don't usually make it into the ads - except for chair lifts, nursing homes, and denture adhesive.

Ernest Campbell, formerly pastor of Riverside Church, New York City,

coined an unforgettable phrase for it once. He called it the Ponce de Leon Anxiety. Ponce, you will remember, was the Spanish conquistidor who set out to discover the legendary spring, the waters of which would make the old young again. What Ponce discovered instead was Florida. He was 52 years old when he set out to discover the Fountain of Youth. Campbell observed: "Those of us who have known the heat of forty summers or more can readily identify with this quest. We fight the calendar the way a losing football team fights the clock."

We are, in fact, learning a lot about aging, and thanks to groups like the Gray Panthers and others we are learning that what we thought we knew isn't always accurate. We are learning that retirement at 65 was an economic determination made in another age and was never based on the performance, potential or capabilities of actual people. We are learning that there is lots of life to be lived in later years. Ernie Campbell quipped that there is no reason to roll over and play dead at 40 or 50 or 60 or 70. The older I get the older my heroes become. Football fans may remember how George Blanda, a reserve quarterback for the Raiders, used to shuffle out onto the field in his late 40's and perform magic. Sinatra and Horowitz are still at it with consumate artistry. Last summer Phil Niekro pitched regularly for the New York Yankees and at 47 won nine games and with each one made every middle-aged fan stand taller. When Niekro takes his cap off he is so gray you think you're seeing one of the player's father. There is great precedent. Moses, the Book of Deuteronomy announces, died at the ripe old age of 120 and his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated.

The refusal to roll over and play dead is healthy but it can become neurotic. When it is determined refusal to deal with reality it is unhealthy. The Biblical position is realism - life lived fully and intentionally, but age and aging embraced as part of the wonderful and surprisingly graceful plan. At some point Updike should take his 180 pounds of tired blood and innards and put them on cross country skis before he kills himself, and Phil Niekro will have to take up softball. Coming to terms with mortality means cultivating the integrity of age, the grace of living honestly with the changes that happen to us. And that is most difficult, in fact impossible, if our lives are driven by an obsession with youthfulness.

We can elect to deal with time by ignoring or defying it, or we can resign stoically to its inexorable movement and look to the past as the source of all meaning and all authenticity and all joy. That dynamic has always been powerful. There has always been a sense in which the glories of the past define the possibilities of the present. In the process of course there is a lionization of the past, an idealizing of the way things used to be so that, through the soft filter of memory, the past seems all positive, pleasant, happy.

It seems that the whole of American culture, sometime around the end of the Vietnam War deliberately and concertedly turned 180 degrees and began to look to the past, not only with affection and pride, but with a nostalgia that bordered on sickness. The assassinations of the late 60's, the loss of innocence which Vietnam was, and then the collapse of credibility from which we have not yet recovered, all conspired to make the

past more appealing to Americans than either the present or the future. We entered a period of cultural nostalgia from which we have not yet emerged. The trouble with that is that when we are engaged in nostalgia we are engaged in very selective remembering, we have the soft filters on, everything looks lovely, .. and the values and attitudes and political opinions based on that selectivity are simply not relevant to the ambiguity and complexity of the present. They aren't relevant to anything because the past wasn't as simple as nostalgia memory reconstructs it. And in the present they can be destructive. When a government official, for instance, suggests that the way to deal with the teen-age pregnancy epidemic, unwed mothers and the consequent total disappearance of the nuclear family, is to tell young women to say "no," it is an exercise in nostalgic irrelevance, which would be silly if it were not so utterly tragic. Harvey Cox discussed the symbols that are important to our culture in his book, The Seduction of the Spirit, and found them largely idealizations of the past. Cox doesn't think much of Disneyland, for instance, which he calls "a consumer's Oberammergau, a permanent tribal dance-marathon for middle America." It occurred to me that Cox wrote it before Disneyworld and Epcot Center opened in Florida, but the real trouble with Disneyland, he wrote, is that "It is an inspired repristination of small-town America, a never-ending liturgical celebration of the legend of the American past, and our effort to conjure a manageable future." [p. 293]

Institutions do that as well as people by the way - look backward to find a way into the future. Mainline churches, for instance, are having a very difficult time dealing with their overwhelmingly minority status in the new pluralistic American culture which is emerging. Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Congregationalists, constituted the dominant theological force in the early days of the Republic. Through the Second World War, we were the mainline religion of the Nation. We are no longer. And it makes no sense whatever to wish it were 1937 instead of 1987. And it makes even less sense to structure our corporate life and plan our programs and conduct our mission as if it were 1937.

The trouble with looking backward, as institutions, or as individuals, is that we will have to live in the future. It will not go away. We do not really have the option of living in the past. 1987 will not become 1986 or 1985 no matter how desperately we wish it would.

Our faith has an important and perhaps saving word for us at this point. It is that time itself is an instrument of God. It is that our time is in God's hands. It is that God is in the future as well as the past. "The Lord is my Shepherd. He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness," the beloved Psalm promises, which means that because we remember God's leading in the past, we can walk into the future with confidence because God is there as well.

In a fine year-end editorial Martin Marty listed some of the frightening threats which make us all long for the simplicity of the past, real or imagined. "The AIDS epidemic, Pakistan and Israel have or can have the bomb, ozone layer problems. Terrorism is on the increase." With tongue in cheek Marty quipped, "We don't know enough about the future to be absolutely pessimistic." And then, at the end, the quietly understated, but rock-like faith of the Christian... "We do know just enough about the

God of the future to picture this God 'being there,' which gives us, as we move into the new year, some measure of hope, some basis for resolve." [Context, 1/1/87]

So we can deal with time and change by ignoring and denying it, or by looking somewhere else for meaning and joy, or - as faith would seem to suggest, we can say 'yes' to time and embrace change, and see each new day as opportunity for growing, experiencing, learning, broadening, deepening. That's a faith position, based not on shallow piety which looks for God's protection from time and change and aging and sickness and trouble and death. It is a faith position based on something we celebrated two weeks ago - the coming of God's love into life in the birth of Jesus Christ, the incarnation of God's power and grace and mercy into human history - into the future, that is to say.

How sad, D. H. Lawrence wrote longingly, that Christmas is only "a domestic feast of sweetmeats and toys, a sort of bank holiday that fades as the day wears on." If that's all it is, the ghost of Christmas past is all the meaning there is and memory is the essence of it all and nostalgia is appropriate indeed.

But the birth of Jesus, we believe, is God's promise about the future.

We hear its echoes centuries before...

"The grass withers and the flower fades
But the word of our God will stand for ever."

We hear its affirmation in an angel's song about Good News to all people.

We ponder its thoughtful reflection by an Apostle - "Prophecy will pass away, tongues will cease, knowledge will disappear. But love never ends."

And we encounter its reflection in the durable human hopefulness that emerges, by the grace of Christ, in the darkest and coldest places.

In the December 24 mail were two Christmas cards with difficult personal messages, each a kind of eloquent Christmas sermon by a thoughtful Christian.

The first was devastating in its announcement of the end of a marriage after 23 years... She wrote, "In spite of all the wrenching pain and despair, there was still God. And that makes the celebration of Christmas not only possible but imperative."

The other spoke of celebrating Christmas after the death of a beloved father. She wrote, "The wound does heal, if slowly. At first the healing frightened me - I felt that by moving on I was abandoning Dad. But I know, in fact it is quite the opposite. As Dad used to say, 'Life is for living, not for looking back.' Thus the greatest tribute I can pay Dad - is to go on living with vigor."

The birth of Jesus Christ is the sign of God's love. The promise is that God's love for us and for our dear ones is the one thing that does not change. The promise is that time and change are part of the gift and that we are gloriously free to affirm it, instead of clutching desperately at the past.

The birth of Jesus and the celebration with its sweet sadness invites us to look back with deep affection and gratitude and at the same time to look forward with eager anticipation and joy and hopefulness.

"Sunrise - sunset
Swiftly fly the years" - is one way to put it.

Another way is...

"Our God, our help in ages past
Our hope for years to come,
Be thou our guard while life shall last
And our eternal home."

Amen.